The Origin of Underground People

legends about elves and other hidden creatures
translated and/or edited by

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Origin of the Hidden People

Two Legends from Iceland

1.

Once upon a time, God Almighty came to visit Adam and Eve. They received him with joy, and showed him everything they had in the house. They also brought their children to him, to show him, and these He found promising and full of hope.

Then He asked Eve whether she had no other children than these whom she now showed him.

She said "None."

But it so happened that she had not finished washing them all, and, being ashamed to let God see them dirty, had hidden the unwashed ones. This God knew well, and said therefore to her, "What man hides from God, God will hide from man."

These unwashed children became forthwith invisible, and took up their abode in mounds, and hills, and rocks. From these are the elves descended, but we men from those of Eve's children whom she had openly and frankly shown to God. And it is only by the will and desire of the elves themselves that men can ever see them.

2.

A traveler once lost his way, and knew not whither to turn or what to do. At last, after wandering about for some time, he came to a hut, which he had never seen before; and on his knocking at the door, an old woman opened it, and invited him to come in, which he gladly did.

Inside, the house seemed to be a clean and good one. The old woman led him to the warmest room, where were sitting two young and beautiful girls. Besides these, no one else was in the house. He was well received and kindly treated, and having eaten a good supper was shown to bed.

He asked whether one of the girls might stay with him, as his companion for the night, and his request was granted.

And now wishing to kiss her, the traveler turned towards her, and placed his hand upon her; but his hand sank through her, as if she had been of mist, and though he could well see her lying beside him, he could grasp nothing but the air.

So he asked what this all meant, and she said, "Be not astonished, for I am a spirit. When the devil, in times gone by, made war in heaven, he, with all his armies, was driven into outer darkness. Those who turned their eyes to look after him as he fell, were also driven out of heaven; but those who were neither for nor against him, were sent to the earth and commanded to dwell there in the rocks and mountains.

These are called elves and hidden people. They can live in company with none but their own race. They do either good or evil, which they will, but what they do they do thoroughly. They have no bodies as you other mortals, but can take a human form and be seen of men when they wish. I am one of these fallen spirits, and so you can never hope to embrace me."

To this fate the traveler yielded himself, and has handed down to us this story.

- Source: Jón Árnason, *Icelandic Legends*, translated by George E. J. Powell and Eiríkur Magnússon (London: Richard Bentley, 1864), pp. 19-21. Translation slightly revised.
- Link to these texts in the original Icelandic: Jón Árnason, *Íslenzkar Þjóðsögur og Æfintýri* vol. 1 (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1862), pp. 5-6.
- The first of these two legends, the story featuring Adam and Eve, is classified as an Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 758 folktale.
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The Origin of Bergfolk

Denmark

Bergmen originated in this way, that when Our Lord cast down the wicked angels from heaven they could not all get to hell together, and some of them settled in the mounds and banks.

Brownies, bergmen, and such creatures originated in this way. When Our Lord cast the wicked angels down from heaven some of them fell on mounds and banks, and these became bergmen; some fell into woods and mosses, and these became fairies (*ellefolk*), while those that fell into buildings became brownies (*nisser*). They are just little devils, the whole lot of them.

- Source: William A. Craigie, *Scandinavian Folk-Lore: Illustrations of the Traditional Beliefs of the Northern Peoples* (London: Alexander Gardner, 1896), p. 93.
- Craigie's source: Evald Tang Kristensen, "Bjærgfolks tilblivelse," Danske Sagn, som de har lydt i Folkemunde, vol. 1 (Aarhus: Folkeblads Trykkeri, 1892), pp. 3-4.
- Additional legends in Danish about the origin of underground people: J. M. Thiele, "Troldfolkets Oprindelse," *Danmarks Folkesagn*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Universitetsboghandler C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1843), pp. 175-76.
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When Satan Was Cast out of Heaven

Sweden

Know that when Satan was cast out of heaven, on account of his pride, and fell to the earth, there were other spirits, which, like him, were also cast out. These spirits, in their fall, were borne hither and thither on the winds like the golden leaves in the autumn storm, falling to earth finally, some into the sea, some into the forests, and some upon the mountains. Where they fell there they remained, so the saying runs, and found there their field of action. After their abiding places they were given different names. Thus we have sea nymphs, mountain fairies, wood fairies, elves, and other spirits, all of which are described in the catechism.

- Source: Herman Hofberg, *Swedish Fairy Tales*, translated by W. H. Myers (Chicago: Belford-Clarke Company, 1890), p. 56. This excerpt is from a longer account entitled "Katrineholm Manor" (pp. 55-59) from the province of Småland in southern Sweden.
- Hofberg's source is "a good old woman, resident in the neighborhood."
- Hofberg does not give this excerpt a title.
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Origin of the Underground People in Amrum

Germany

The Lord Jesus came one day to a house where a woman lived who had five beautiful and five ugly children. She hid the five ugly children in the cellar. The Lord Jesus asked her where her other children were. The woman said: "I do not have any more children."

Then the Lord Jesus cursed the five ugly children, saying: "That which is beneath shall remain beneath, and that which above shall remain above!"

When the woman returned to the cellar, her five ugly children had disappeared. The underground people are their descendants.

- Source: Johann Georg Theodor Grässe, *Sagenbuch des Preußischen Staats*, vol. 2 (Glogau: Verlag von Carl Flemming, 1871), p. 1092. This account (entitled "Die Unterirdischen," no. 1350, pp. 1091-1092) contains many additional beliefs about the underground people on the Island of Amrum in the North Sea.
- This is an Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 758 folktale.
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Lower Elemental Spirits

Bohemia

In addition to the gods, heathens knew a whole row of lower demons which can be placed together under the names sprites and elves. They constitute a distinct spirit realm on earth, independent of the world of humans. They possess supernatural powers with which they harm and help humans. However, they shy away from humans, because physically they are not our equals. In Bohemia they tell about the origin of these demons as follows:

When God cast out the arrogant angels from heaven, they became the evil spirits that plague mankind day and night, tormenting us and inflicting us with harm. The ones who fell into hell and into caves and abysses became devils and death-maidens. However, those who fell onto the earth became goblins, imps, dwarfs, thumblings, alps, noon-and-evening-ghosts, and will-o'-the-wisps. Those who fell into the forests became the wood-spirits who live there: the hey-men, the wild-men, the forest-men, the wild-women, and the forest-women. Finally, those who fell into the water became water spirits: water-men, mermaids, and merwomen.

- Source: Josef Virgil Grohmann, *Sagenbuch von Böhmen und Mähren*, vol. 1 (Prague: Verlag der J. G. Calve'schen k. k. Universitäts-Buchhandlung, 1863) , p. 108-109.
- The German names of the spirits mentioned are: Teufel, Todmädchen, Kobolde, Schrätlein, Zwerge, Daumlinge, Alpe, Mittags- und Abendgespenster, Irrlichter, Waldgeister, Hemänner, wilde Männer, Waldmänner, wilde Weiber, Waldfrauen, Wassergeister, Wassermänner, Meerjungfern, Meerfrauen.
- The historical region of Bohemia is currently part of the Czech Republic.
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Origin of the Fairies

Anglesea, Wales

In our Savior's time there lived a woman whose fortune it was to be possessed of nearly a score of children, and as she saw our blessed Lord approach her dwelling, being ashamed of being so prolific, and that he might not see them all, she concealed about half of them closely, and after his departure, when she went in search of them, to her great surprise found they were all gone. They never afterwards could be discovered, for it was supposed

that as a punishment from heaven for hiding what God had given her, she was deprived of them; and it is said these her offspring have generated the race called fairies.

- Source: Wirt Sikes, *British Goblins: Welsh Folk-Lore, Fairy Mythology, Legends, and Traditions* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1880), pp. 133-34.
- Sikes calls this account "a local legend of the origin of fairies in Anglesea."
- This is an Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 758 folktale.
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The Baby Farmer

Wales

Old Kaddy was a baby-farmer, and one day she went to the woods to gather sticks for her fire, and whilst she was gathering the sticks she found a piece of gold, and took it home; but she never told anyone she had found the money, for she always pretended to be very poor.

But though she was so poor, she used to dress two of her children in fine clothes; but the others, whom she did not like, she kept in the filthiest rags.

One day a man knocked at her door, and asked to see the children.

He sat down in her little room, and she went and brought the ragged little boy and girl, saying she was very poor, and couldn't afford to dress them better; for she had been careful to hide the well-dressed little boy and girl in a cockloft.

After the stranger had gone she went to the cockloft to look for her well-dressed favorites, but they had disappeared, and they were never seen afterwards, for they were turned into fairies.

- Source: Peter Henry Emerson, *Welsh Fairy-Tales and Other Stories* (London: D. Nutt, 1894), p. 14.
- This is a variant of an Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 758 folktale.
- Explanation of baby farming from *Wikipedia*:

> **Baby farming** was a term used in late-Victorian Era Britain (and, less commonly, in Australia and the United States) to mean the taking in of an infant or child for payment; if the infant was young, this usually included wet-nursing (breast-feeding by a woman not the mother). Some baby farmers "adopted" children for lump-sum payments, while others cared for infants for periodic payments. Though baby farmers were paid in the understanding that care would be provided, the term "baby farmer" was used as an insult, and improper treatment was usually implied.

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The Fairies as Fallen Angels

Ireland

The islanders, like all the Irish, believe that the fairies are the fallen angels who were cast down by the Lord God out of heaven for their sinful pride. And some fell into the sea, and some on the dry land, and some fell deep down into hell, and the devil gives to these knowledge and power, and sends them on earth where they work much evil.

But the fairies of the earth and the sea are mostly gentle and beautiful creatures, who will do no harm if they are let alone, and allowed to dance on the fairy raths in the moonlight to their own sweet music, undisturbed by the presence of mortals.

As a rule, the people look on fire as the great preservative against witchcraft, for the devil has no power except in the dark. So they put a live coal under the chum, and they wave a lighted wisp of straw above the cow's head if the beast seems sickly. But as to the pigs, they take no trouble, for they say the devil has no longer any power over them now. When they light a candle they cross themselves, because the evil spirits are then clearing out of the house in fear of the light, lire and Holy Water they hold to be sacred, and are powerful; and the best safeguard against all things evil, and the surest test in case of suspected witchcraft.

- Source: Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde (Lady Wilde), *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland: With Sketches of the Irish Past* (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1888), p. 89.
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Links to related sites

- The Norse Creation Myth. In this ancient account, first recorded by the Icelander Snorri Sturluson in about 1220, we learn that dwarfs originated from maggots that appeared in the rotting flesh of the slain giant Ymir. By the decree of the gods these maggot-dwarfs acquired human understanding and the appearance of men, although they lived hidden beneath the earth and in rocks.
- Eve's Unequal Children. This tale (Aarne-Thompson-Uther type 758) from the collection of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm is very similar to the first Icelandic legend and the story from the island of Amrum above. However, the Grimms use the tale to justify the existence of different social classes rather that to explain the origin of hidden underground people.
- D. L. Ashliman's **folktexts**, a library of folktales, folklore, fairy tales, and mythology.
- Germanic Myths, Legends, and Sagas.

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